DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 036 CS 500 250

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TITLE Public Service Advertising and Social Problems: the Case of Drug Abuse Prevention.

PUB DATE Dec 72

NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (58th, Chicago, Illinois, December 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29

DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; *Audiences; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Drug Abuse; *Information Dissemination; Persuasive Discourse; Programing (Broadcast); Propaganda; *Television

ABSTRACT

This paper explores certain findings of a DAIR (Drug Abuse Information Research) project undertaken at the University of Connecticut which is investigating the dissemination and impact of drug abuse information. Specifically, findings regarding audience response to persuasive antidrug abuse messages on television are discussed. On the basis of the obtained data the authors conclude that the media and message strategies currently employed in the United States in dealing with the drug abuse problem are simply not in accord with available research evidence. Media scheduling of drug abuse public service announcements appears to be done at random without evident concern for reaching intended audiences or generating maximum effect. Certain of the strategies commonly employed appear to produce reactions in seeming contradiction to stated message goals. The authors suggest that a rigorously planned set of information dissemination activities, in which both message and channel selection is geared to particular audience segments, is needed. (Author/LG)

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by

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In Press: Informazione Radio TV
Radiotelevisione Italiana, Rome

US 500 250

Public Service Advertising and Social Problems: the Case of Drug Abuse Prevention

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In response to statistics indicating the extent of drug abuse in the United States, a variety of public and private agencies have set about the task of informing a mass public regarding the dangers involved in illicit drug use. Several of these sponsored mass information campaigns have publicly expressed their envisioned goals. The advertising agency originally commissioned by the National Institute of Mental Health stressed the need to "arm potential tasters among this country's youth with facts which might help them resist peer group pressure."[1] The NIMH itself has emphasized the development of an informational strategy designed to increase both awareness and understanding of the drug problem, with the ultimate aim of preventing drug abuse.[2] Despite a proliferation of informational efforts and the existence of some general consensus as to the ultimate goals of these efforts, no data has been obtained regarding campaign <u>effectiveness</u> in either creating awareness about drug abuse or decreasing its incidence. Evaluation of drug abuse materials, when attempted, has generally consisted of some sort of inter-judge agreement among those people felt to be experts in the broad drug "communications" field.

Little has been done to date in terms of examining the intended target audiences themselves in order that their responses might be employed as standards for evaluating anti-drug efforts. Although various techniques for audience response assessment are

customarily employed by product marketers, examination of available research indicates a lack of systematic inquiry into the effects of public service campaigns, even though the problems addressed by these campaigns (drug abuse; venereal disease; discrimination) have acknowledged social significance.

In response to this apparent research need, the DAIR (Drug Abuse Information Research) project was undertaken at the University of Connecticut, comprising to date some 13 related studies investigating the dissemination and impact of drug abuse information. The present paper explores certain of these findings regarding audience response to "persuasive" anti-drug abuse messages on television.

Information Availbility

It has been stated that drug abuse is primarily a youth problem (Richards and Langer, 1971). Once this target has been identified, however, the appropriate means (both media and message strategy) to disseminate information to this audience must be determined.

Previous studies (e.g. Tannenbaum and Greenberg, 1968) have reported that television is the most credible medium for news and information, especially for younger viewers. Also, Frejer et al. (1971), in an extensive survey, found that "news media" were cited by Canadian teenagers as the most informative source of drug abuse information, as well as being the most helpful source in convincing them that marijuana is harmful. In refining these initial findings, Hanneman (in press) found that the mass media (particularly television) often acted as a source of initial awareness about drugs for college students, but that

this relationship was especially strong: a) with respect to "harder" drugs (psychedelics, barbiturates and opiates); and, b) for students who were not themselves users of illicit drugs.

In sum, television, as a heavily used and believed communications medium for young nonusers, apparently has the potential for informing this target audience about at least the riskier illicit drugs.

In examining how this seeming potential has in actuality been employed by U.S. broadcasters, Hanneman and McEwen (in press) and Hanneman, McEwen and Coyne (1972) reported on the nature and extent of televised public service drug abuse appeals. In the first study, all major television stations in a three state area (Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island) were observed by trained coders from sign-on to sign-off for two weeks in 1971. The major results were as follows:

-- over 90% of the anti-drug abuse advertisements were broadcast during times of typically lower audience attendance (i.e. other than prime time);

-- 87% of the durg abuse public service ads presented only general information (that is, no specific data, evidence or statistics were included);

-- 42% of all PSA's viewed referred to the harmful social and/or physical consequences of illicit drug use;

-- approximately 18% of the PSA's were explicitly directed at young people;

-- 67% of the messages involved appeals by celebrities.

This initial analysis thus suggested some inconsistency between the stated goal of "nonpunitive information" and the observed tendency to present fear appeals generally devoid of specific information (of instrumental value). In addition, there

exist no data to indicate that the celebrities employed (primarily actors and football players) have the qualification[3] to discuss drug abuse.

In order to determine the generalizability of these findings across different times and different social problem topic areas, the second study examined all public service advertisements presented during the week of June 24-30, 1972 on the nine television channels available for reception in the Hartford, Connecticut metropolitan area. In addition to sign-on to sign-off observation by trained coders, data from broadcasters' log books were also obtained as a check on the reliability of the coder-recorded data.[4]

Results indicated that only 2% of the total available air time (747 minutes out of a total of over 500 hours) was devoted to public service advertising of any sort, while commercial advertising accounted for approximately 20% of air time (over 100 hours of the total). This existed despite the acknowledged "social crisis" situations addressed by many of the PSA's (alcoholism; venereal disease). Within the public service advertising category itself, drug abuse PSA's comprised a total of 43 minutes of television time (about 5% of the total public service time), while all categories of social problems combined accounted for less than 20% of total PSA time.

Additionally, the second analysis reaffirms the finding that public service message presentation is more dependent upon the existence of unsold or less desirable commercial time slots than it is the result of concerted efforts to maximize exposure to (and hence awareness of) the topics addressed. Over 80% of

the PSA's were broadcast at other than prime times (the majority being shown during the 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM class B and C time periods, with less than 10% of the total shown during class AA times). The "social problem" PSA's were perhaps even more removed from maximum exposure than were the other, seemingly less controversial or upsetting, PSA's. Social problem messages (including drug abuse PSA's) tended to be shown most often during late night talk shows, news shows, and early morning children's shows. All of these program categories have typically lower audience attendance than do the drama, movie and comedy shows which were also potentially available as PSA vehicles.

Also, despite the appearance of drug abuse messages during children's shows, the majority of this programming is directed at very young children (pre-school) who have not been identified as an intended target audience for anti-drug appeals. In addition, the messages shown during these shows were of a predominantly general, nonspecific orientation (rather than youth-directed) and would hence have probably had minimal effect among a youthful audience if such an audience had been desired by the message producers.

Findings such as these do not appear to reflect any sort of broadcaster "conspiracy" to ignore public service commitments. Broadcasters seem to lack a clear understanding of exactly what this commitment <u>should</u> entail with respect to PSA's. Public service messages are assigned strictly on a time availability basis, thus indicating that such appeals, regardless of the social crisis nature of their topics, are treated by most TV stations with a "business as usual" approach.

Information Impact

Separately from any questions regarding actual or potential audience exposure to messages of social concern, the question of the apparent effectiveness of such messages (i.e. given that exposure occurs) was addressed.

One requisite component of any determination of receiver response to stimuli (e.g. advertisements) is an examination of the range of perceptual reactions manifested by audience members. One statistical technique frequently employed in such examinations (i.e. in looking for hypothetical, simple cognitive structures underlying respondent perceptions) is factor analysis. Factor analytic procedures provide a form of data reduction enabling the parsimonious description of the major dimensions or "factors" which comprise a given set of responses.

Applications of factor analysis to examining reactions to television commercials (Mindak, 1956; Leavitt, 1970) have established dimensions of viewer judgment for persuasive advertising, but have been applied only to consumer product advertising (e.g. tuna fish; beer; cereal). The generalizability of such dimensions to situations where persuasive messages are concerned with the solution of social problems would thus of necessity be suspect. For this reason, the first phase of this research set about the establishment of perceptual factors specifically relevant to drug abuse advertisements.

In a three-stage set of studies, respondents evaluated the apparent applicability of a number of audience-generated descriptor terms (adjectives) to a variety of anti-drug messages. A final sample of 207 college students, tested individually, in-

dicated their reactions to one of five alternative PSA's on each of 38 five-interval applicability scales. Results indicated the presence of three stable factors.

The first dimension of response apparently represents perceptions of the personal relevance or meaningfulness of the commercial message. Tentatively labelled "Relevant Information," the factor included the following descriptors: makes sense; worth remembering; convincing; believable; thought-provoking. The second separate factor was labelled "Dynamic Creativity" and contained descriptors such as: unique; creative; powerful; original. The final factor contained terms indicative of how "Hard Sell" the message was perceived to be (e.g. threatening; disturbing; overdone; hard sell).

In sum, the data suggest that three major independent dimensions underlie student perceptions of televised anti-drug abuse advertisements: how personally relevant the message content seems to be; how novel and exciting the manner of presentation is; and, how disturbing and emotional the message strategy seems.

Commercial "effectiveness" obviously does not consist of any single dimension among these three. Rather, impact results from the specific combinations of these factors. For example, it is neither "good" nor "bad" (in terms of generating desired impact) for an advertisement to be perceived as relatively high in Hard Sell. Evidence suggests (cf. Higbee, 1969) that greater fear arousal and emotionality may be associated with greater message-generated effect providing the information and suggested behaviors are seen as personally relevant and the source of

the message is seen as highly credible.

Thus, it becomes necessary to assess a variety of receiver responses. Knowledge of audience perceptions of the message source and of the message itself are required in order to develop predictions of audience response to the combination of perceptual stimuli called a "drug abuse advertisement." As a case in point, a recent study (McEwen, Hanneman and Tomey, 1972) examined the sensitivity of perceptual measures to alterations in message strategy, with the goal of indicating potential for message impact. Five 60-second color PSA's were obtained from the current stock of advertisements released through the National Clearinghouse for Drug Abuse Information. College students, tested individually, viewed the films (between 39 and 47 students saw any given film) and reacted by means of questionnaires composed of commercial perceptual scales and drug evaluation scales.

Analysis of the obtained results indicates that the three basic components of commercial perceptions are sensitive to differences in PSA strategy. Analysis of variance tests yielded significant differences (of a magnitude which could happen by chance alone only 1 out of a hundred times) between the five PSA's with respect to perceptions of Relevant Information, Dynamic Creativity, and Hard Sell. Variance estimates of reliability indicate projected consistency of audience judgment ranging between .72 and .94 for the factors. Consistent with earlier findings (McEwen and Wittbold, 1972) the single most discriminating factor is the Hard Sell dimension. This no doubt reflects a broader range of strategy types in this area (from the high fear, scare tactics used in some PSA's to the relatively

soft sell narration utilized in others).

Additional information relevant to projecting potential impact was provided by an examination of viewer evaluations of illicit drugs (the topic addressed by the PSA's). Overall, the data did not indicate significantly differing perceptions of drugs resultant from the single message exposures. This seems consistent with similar findings regarding the relative inability of individual media presentations to substantially alter audience evaluations (cf. Klapper, 1960). Nevertheless, the potential for subtler changes in audience "images" exists, as Schramm and Roberts (1971) have suggested. A preliminary indication of the direction of such changes and of the potential for altering subpopulation perceptions can be gained by additional segmentation of the audience based on prior behaviors (in this case, prior drug usage) and orientation toward risk-taking. For example, obtained results indicated differential effectiveness of alternative strategies according to whether or not the individual audience member was a user of illicit drugs. Certain strategies (in particular, the softer sell, parental-type "concern" messages) were seen as more relevant by nonusers of drugs and simultaneously yielded drug "images" in greater correspondence with the message-advocated position (e.g. greater perceived risk and danger in drug abuse; greater perceived inappropriateness of drugs for social or recreational purposes). These messages were not, however, the most effective strategies for dealing with drug users, who expressed a need for objective information relevant to their individual situations and who generally rejected government sources and message strategies which they deemed to be overemo-

tional or condescending.

Audience data of this sort would appear to have great diagnostic value for examining the strengths and weaknesses of available strategies (e.g. whether the messages high in Hard Sell are also sufficiently high in Relavant Information in the eyes of their intended audiences), and also in determining future message strategies to reach presently unresponsive audience segments.

Discussion

On the basis of the data obtained so far, it seems apparent that the media and message strategies currently employed in the U.S. in dealing with the crisis drug abuse problem are simply not in accord with available research evidence. Media scheduling of drug abuse PSA's appears a largely random sort of decision without evident concern for reaching intended audiences or generating maximum effect. Message strategies tested have not previously been studied to determine actual audience response and, upon examination, certain of the strategies commonly employed appear to produce reactions in seeming contradiction to stated message goals.

What seems to be required is a rigorously planned set of information-dissemination activities in which both message and channel selection is geared to particular audience segments with specific communication goals. As the increasing statistics regarding drug abuse incidence underscore, the effectiveness of the present, hit-or-miss, untested efforts is at best questionable.

Footnotes

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Gerhard J. Hanneman (Ph.D., Michigan State University, 1970) is Chairman of the Communication Division at the University of Connecticut. His research interests include information dissemination and mass media effects on aggressive behavior.

As Co-Directors of Project DAIR, Dr. McEwen and Dr. Hanneman have been conducting a series of investigations into the communication antecedents and correlates of drug abuse.

1. Reported in Editor and Publisher, Sept. 6, 1969.

2. A Guide to Drug Abuse and Education Materials. National Institute of Mental Health.

3. Berlo, Lemert and Mertz (1970) cite qualification or perceived expertise as one of the major dimensions of source "credibility."

4. Unfortunately, only four stations' log books were made available for examination. Still, the four represent the range of network input available in most markets (all three commercial networks; three VHF stations and a smaller UHF affiliate).

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